

Nantucket Atheneum  
Lower India and Federal Streets  
Nantucket  
Nantucket County  
Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-812

HABS  
MASS  
10-NANT  
14-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20240

## NANTUCKET ATHENEUM

HABS  
MASS  
10-NANT  
14-

Location: Lower India (or Pearl) and Federal Streets,  
Nantucket, Massachusetts

Present Owner: Proprietors and Shareholders of Nantucket  
Atheneum

Present Occupant: Nantucket Atheneum

Present Use: Library and Reading Room

Brief Statement  
of Significance: Intellectual center for Nantucket, originally built  
in 1825, it was rebuilt after the fire of 1846 with  
further embellishments to its Greek Revival design.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: The building originally on the site of the present Atheneum was built about 1825 and incorporated by the First Universalist Church and Society, January 20, 1827. It was sold to Charles G. Coffin and David Joy on August 6, 1834 for the use of the Nantucket Atheneum.

In 1820 seven young men of Nantucket had associated themselves under the name of the Nantucket Mechanics' Social Library Association. In 1823 another society was formed and named the Columbian Library Society. The two societies united in 1827 and the new society was called the United Library Association. Two of its members, Charles G. Coffin and David Joy in 1833 bought a lot on Main Street which they presented to the Society on condition that they would raise \$3500 and build a brick building. The sum of \$4200 was raised. This lot proving too small, it was exchanged for the property of the Universalist Church (the site of the present Atheneum). This structure was remodelled and incorporated in 1834 as the Nantucket Atheneum. It was destroyed by fire in 1846. The present building was completed and opened to the public on February 1st, 1847.

(Abstract, History of Nantucket by Alexander Starbuck.)

2. Date of erection: The original building on the site (Universalist Church) was built about 1825, completely burned in 1846, and the present building was built in 1847, with the Great Hall on the second floor as it was before the fire.
3. Architect: It is fairly certain that Frederick Coleman, the brother of John Coleman who built several houses at Nantucket around 1830, was the architect for the rebuilding in 1847. He specialized in intricate carvings and designs and was an Island craftsman.  
(Abstract, A Mirror of Nantucket by Fowlkes.)
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: The present building is similar in architecture to the old one, to which a portico was added in 1834. At that time the Great Hall lecture room accommodated an audience of about four hundred and fifty persons. It had a small stage, a drop curtain and an anteroom each side of the stage.
5. Alterations and additions: The style of the present building was probably influenced by the porticoed mansions that had just been finished on Main Street. The building was erected of wood, and the Attic Ionic order which was used is much more richly detailed than that on the Methodist Church built seven years earlier. Although Hamlin says "its recessed in antis porch has marked individuality, and the whole building is said to resemble the Universalist Church which had stood on the same site before the fire ..." there can be no question but that this building is far more classic than its predecessor. One temple-front has been superimposed on top of the other and the walls are not now clapboard, but rather they are flush which makes them appear more classic.  
(Abstract, A Mirror of Nantucket by Fowlkes.)

The Great Hall on the second floor was restored with a seating capacity of six hundred. It is over nineteen feet high, arched and well proportioned.

- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: One of the first buildings which was rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1846 was the Atheneum, which indicates that the town fathers possessed a real civic spirit and a sense of the importance of culture.

Between 1840 and 1917 many cultural activities, county fairs, debates, dramatics, concerts, and a variety of other affairs were held there. Ralph Waldo Emerson gave lectures, with Maria Mitchell a member of the audience. Other speakers

included Henry Thoreau, Theodore Parker, Louis Agassiz, Horace Greeley, Wendell Phillips, William Ellery Channing, and John James Audubon.

The rebuilt library was fortunate in having Maria Mitchell for its librarian.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Old picture before 1846, History of Nantucket by Alexander Starbuck, Boston, C. E. Goodspeed and Co., 1924, p. 337; picture after 1846, Ibid, p. 338; picture of Great Hall at time of the first telephone communication between Nantucket and the mainland, August 29, 1916 in Historic Nantucket by Nantucket Historical Association.

2. Bibliography:

Fowlkes, George Allen. A Mirror of Nantucket. New Jersey, 1959.

Nantucket Historical Association Records

Starbuck, Alexander. The History of Nantucket. Boston: C. E. Goodspeed and Co., 1924.

Prepared by Mrs. Marie Coffin  
Nantucket, Massachusetts  
January, 1965

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This is the best local example of mid-nineteenth century Greek revival eclectic design applied to institutional architecture.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 51'-4" by 71'-3½" not including steps.
2. Foundations: Brick foundation walls and piers with cement wash painted grey.
3. Wall construction: Flush horizontal siding except for clapboards at north side, Doric pilasters at all corners; exterior painted white.

4. Structural system: Wood frame; king-post truss, mortise and tenon joinery, treenail and strap iron fasteners.
5. Porch, stoops and stairs:
  - a. Portico:
    - 1.) Distyle portico in antis at Pearl Street entrance has projecting wood steps, masonry piers, two fluted Ionic wood columns and two Corinthian pilasters, recessed platform with wood flooring.
    - 2.) Modern concrete stair and brick and concrete block retaining wall for access into basement space.
    - 3.) Bulkhead at northeast corner below 1965 addition.
6. Chimney: Brick chimney at north elevation painted white, corbelled cap painted black, cast iron clean-out at base.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Central classic doorway of heroic scale with eight-panel wood overdoor, and two six-panel out-swinging doors; low triangular pediment, repeat of portico entablature with cyma reversa and torus architrave, plain frieze, and boxed cornice; smaller classic doorway at each end of portico, low triangular pediment similar to window trim (east doorway and door false to provide symmetry); doorway to basement at east side has simple trim, glazed and paneled door; sheet metal fire door between vestibule and stairway to second floor.
  - b. Windows: Window frames have simple triangular pediment, stiles and sill, six-over-six single hung sash predominate, some four-over-four single hung sash; miscellaneous inswinging awning windows in basement; window screen and half screens in some windows.
8. Roof:
  - a. Shape and covering: Gable, composition shingle covering; one scuttle and parts of two more scuttles in roof.

b. Cornice and eaves:

- 1.) Gable of roof and of portico: Cornice is a composite of cyma recta, torus, boxed eave, cyma reversa and torus.
- 2.) Entablature: Consists of stepped corona cornice, boxed eave, cyma reversa molding; plain frieze separated from stepped architrave with series of cyma reversa, cavetto and scotia moldings; wood gutter in cornice, metal downspouts.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: Furnace and reading room (c. 1966), remains of old coal bin at southwest corner.
- b. First floor: Entrances from portico into stairway to second floor and into vestibule for library spaces, workrooms and stairhall at rear; entrance into 1965 addition on northeast side.
- c. Second floor: Entrance from stairhall into auditorium ("Great Hall"), raised stage, stairhall and stairs to attic at southeast corner; storeroom and stairway at north end of auditorium.

2. Stairways:

- a. Main stairway between first floor and auditorium is semicircular with well, turned wood newels and balusters, round handrail.
- b. Stairway, northeast corner: U-shaped staircase to second floor and to basement spaces.

3. Flooring: Wood strips stained dark brown.

4. Wall and ceiling finishes:

- a. Walls: Plaster walls in reading rooms, wood book-cases, plaster and vertical board paneling in second floor auditorium, heavy entablature at spring line of vaulted ceiling.
- b. Ceiling: Pressed sheet metal ceiling in reading rooms in panel pattern interrupted with sheet metal

rosettes in west room only; papered and painted ceiling of auditorium, some pressed metal strips in floral pattern used as cornice and decorative strips.

5. Doorways and doors: Simple classic doorways, four-panel wood doors.
  6. Trim: Extensive use of pressed sheet metal as entablature and soffits of dropped beams in reading room; paneled librarians' desks in reading room and auditorium; some early cast iron and wood bookcases; three perforated plaster rosettes in ceiling of second floor space probably served as vents to attic and roof scuttles; panel face of stage and lectern in second floor auditorium; gilded wood letters in the south front portico frieze spell "Atheneum."
  7. Hardware: Miscellaneous late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century doorknobs of glass and metal.
  8. Lighting: Modern electric.
  9. Heating: Modern hot water radiators, oil-fired system.
- D. Site and Surroundings: The Nantucket Atheneum is on the east side of Federal Street and faces on Lower India (Pearl) Street. A 1965 addition is to the northeast. The total site, defined by Federal, Lower India, South Water Streets and an east-west alley, is formally landscaped with a lawn, brick terrace and periphery planting dating from 1961. A masonry retaining wall topped with a simple wood apron and baluster fence is at the side walk edge at Lower India Street side and returns to the southwest and southeast corners of the building. A typical Nantucket fence of palings and top rail and a wood picket fence enclose the east portion of the site; brick sidewalks between fences and granite curbs.

Prepared by F. Blair Reeves, AIA  
Nantucket, Massachusetts  
August, 1971

### PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as part of the 1967 Historic American Buildings Survey summer project on Nantucket, Massachusetts. This is the second project of a continuing HABS comprehensive survey of the early architecture and urban design of Nantucket financed by a grant from the Nantucket Historical Trust.

The project was under the general supervision of James C. Massey, Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Measured drawings were made by student architects under the direction of Eugene George, A.I.A. Historical information was provided by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin of Nantucket, Massachusetts. Architectural description prepared by Professor F. Blair Reeves, A.I.A., (University of Florida). Photographs are by Cervin Robinson of Nantucket, Massachusetts, and Cortlandt V. D. Hubbard, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The material was edited for deposit in the Library of Congress by Mrs. Constance Werner Ramirez, July 1971.